

# Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II

## A Review

[Ezra MacVie](#)

by Keith Lowe, St. Martin's Press, 2012, 460 pp.

Keith Lowe is a professional historian in every sense, most of them good. He is not only diligent, energetic, insightful, and scrupulous, he is also imaginative in the best ways, and an engaging writer of prose. Being young, he has his career ahead of him and his first, and only other, book on the market is *Inferno: The Devastation of Hamburg, 1943*. That book, perhaps like David Irving's 1963 best-seller, *The Destruction of Dresden*, might be a bit too sympathetic to the people who instigated the Holocaust to support the rising career of a historian of Twentieth-Century Europe. And for understandable reasons, Lowe does not wish to suffer the fate of David Irving, whose contract to publish *Goebbels—Mastermind of the Third Reich* was cancelled under pressure from groups who branded Irving a "Holocaust denier." That contract, as it happens, was with St. Martin's Press, the publisher of this very book.

So, at least to a reader familiar with this history and with the vicissitudes of advancing a career in any field subject to public approbation, *Savage Continent* to some extent comes off as a performance of redemptive historiography. That is, in certain of the many theaters of conflict covered by Lowe's survey, acts of understandable vengeance by Jews against citizens of defeated Germany are presented as the revenge of conquered, and conquering, persons of indeterminate ethnicity or other motivation. Thus, for example, Salomon Morel, the infamous commandant of the post-war Zgoda/Świętochłowice concentration camp for Prussian Germans, is identifiable as Jewish only by the dispositive passage on Page 144:

*"After the fall of communism, he moved to Israel, where he has lived ever since. The Polish Ministry of Justice applied for his extradition, but Israel was obliged to turn the application down because, according to their statute of limitations, too much time had elapsed since the crimes were committed."* [emphasis mine]

Near the end of the book, further such expiation is to be found in a rather sanctimonious section on Page 373 devoted to the exploitation of distortions of history for political purposes in this passage concerning the rank opportunism displayed by purveyors of "nationalist" sentiments:

*"Words like 'Holocaust' and 'genocide' are bandied about without thought for their [actual](#) meaning, and Polish prison camps like Łambinowice and Świętochłowice are labelled 'extermination camps' as if the hundreds of people who died in them are somehow equivalent to the millions shoveled into ovens at Sobibor [sic], Bełżec and Treblinka."* [emphasis mine]

So much for the young historian/author and his calculated scribbling. He shows much promise, including the sense to render obeisance to the powers that be as he heaves his career up off the ground. It is what he must do if he is ever to acquire impact. There is much more to this work than occasional omissions and groveling.



*English historian, Keith Lowe*

*By Ave Maria Möistlik (Own work) [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons*

Much like the discoverers/inventors of “the Holocaust,” Lowe has revealed a war, or wars, without a name—a set of conflicts that, even if they did not entail declarations of war against one government by another government, nonetheless exerted a profound impact upon the constitution of Europe’s states over the decade following the surrender of the German government to the governments whose armies had conquered its territory. And Lowe’s account encompasses mass slaughters that exhibited all the cruelty and injustice that is to be found in the various carnages constituting World War II itself. Perhaps to his credit, Lowe has eschewed the opportunity to “brand” his subject with a label. He might have reprised the ingenious creators of “the Holocaust” and labelled it “the Conflagration.” Or he might have struck out on his own and called it “the Afterwar,” or even “the Aftershock,” hardly more metaphoric than the term that is forever branded on our consciences by countless movies, books, and television specials.

But his subject has every quality justifying such branding, except possibly for sponsorship by an aggressive, abundantly financed national sovereignty such as the one still feeding on the well-publicized horrors of National Socialist policy concerning its Jewish minority. His subject, ultimately, is the bewildering welter of nationalistic, vengeful, personal, and especially communistic contenders for control of the governmental powers that had been put, as it were, “up for grabs” by the traumatic

disruptions of World War II and its tumultuous conclusion. His treatment follows an orderly, roughly west-to-east sequence in which he describes in detail how each country occupied by the Germans recovered its identity, found and punished those deemed guilty of cooperating (too much) with the occupiers, and in the process settled many scores, political and personal, quite unrelated to the recovery of national existence.

In the course of this eminently worthy exercise, Lowe occasionally displays “insights” that go well beyond what the discerning reader might consider within the historian’s ambit. In this passage, he offers an explanation for the tendency of women in conquered territories to cohabit with German soldiers:

*“On the whole European women slept with Germans not because they were forced to, or because their own men were absent, or because they needed money or food—but simply because they found the strong, ‘knightly’ image of the German soldiers intensely attractive, especially compared to the weakened impression they had of their own menfolk.”*

This entire statement, apparently encompassing women from the Caucasus to France, is based, it turns out, on a survey of women in *Denmark*, a country bordering—and friendly with—Germany. This would seem to represent a deduction too far by at least half. The circumstances of women, and indeed of their German occupiers, in Ukraine and the Soviet Union would appear to the informed observer to vary substantially from those of their contemporaries in Denmark.

But Lowe employs the entire meme of national cuckolding for very meaningful conclusions regarding the postwar behaviors of men from overrun nations concerning each other’s wives, sisters, daughters, and even mothers. This behavior entailed a good deal of public shaming such as having the women’s hair cropped, and forcing them to parade naked down the streets of their towns and villages before their townfolk.

Such enactments, of course, are among the very least-violent or destructive of the many crimes committed by various partisans in the postwar environment, and indeed are among those having the slightest long-term effects.

The long-term effects of murders and executions, both of which numbered in the many thousands, are obviously eternal as concerns their victims. But the long-term effects of civil wars, revolutions, coups, and interventions by foreign superpowers including, in approximate order, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain, bore on much-greater numbers of people, and countries, than did local abuses of the temporary breakdown of civil order. Indeed, such government-level effects ultimately dictated the “map” of Europe and the location of the celebrated “Iron Curtain” that descended in Europe around 1946, when Winston Churchill famously named the phenomenon in a speech at Fulton, Missouri.

For the geopolitically oriented, Lowe’s well-conceived treatment may find its greatest value in the detailed, country-by-country report it renders on the triumph or defeat of (Soviet) communism in each polity. This explication of the alignment of governments over the latter half of the Twentieth Century is a reward to the reader little hinted at in the title of the book nor in the blurbs and descriptive material that adorns its exterior. But it is all there, meaningfully framed in the pre-war and wartime contexts pertaining to each locality and the factions contending in each for dominance. The interventions and threats of intervention exercised by the superpowers are illuminated in the ways that best exemplify

Lowe's mastery of all the manifold histories that bear on the outcomes, complete with reasoned assessments of the effects of potentialities never manifested in visible acts.

The innumerable postwar atrocities recounted in this somber mélange were, of course, adumbrated during the war by larger, state-initiated atrocities that, like their postwar progeny, cut in every conceivable direction through the ranks of victims and perpetrators at all times occupying the European stage. In these, as in those central to his subject, Lowe ever-so-lightly favors the victors whose desiderata continue to dominate the arena into which he must perforce fling this, the fruit of years of his very most assiduous professional efforts. For example, as part of his story's background, he presents on Page 15 a map of Europe headed "The Dead of Europe, 1939-45." Each country has two numbers in it: the total number of dead, and of these, the number of Jews. The "inside" number is not civilians, nor females, but Jews. The line is nicely toed here, as elsewhere.

Favoritism is not denied Lowe's country's wartime Soviet allies, either, as agency is soft-pedaled for the Soviets, but not for the Germans, as on Page 6:

*"... mines set by the retreating Germans were defused by Red Army sappers just in time. Most of the public buildings in Kiev were mined when the Soviets retreated in 1941 ..."*

The *buildings were mined*? Differentials such as this are so subtle that the author could plausibly plead mere inattention to counter a charge of purposeful phrasing, but: (a) they have their effect, intended or otherwise, upon readers; and (b) absence of the writer's conscious intent can reveal a bias so deep that its service does not even require the writer's awareness.

Refreshingly, Lowe does a reasonable, if somewhat terse, job of reporting the postwar expulsions of Germans from portions of Germany made over to that unfortunate country's conquering enemies. He does not appear to shrink from fulsome descriptions of the horror and injustice visited upon millions of victims, the vast majority of whom would be counted as innocent under any human standard of judgment. He also recounts the horrific after-Holocaust experienced by Jews returning to their homes in Eastern Europe, there to find themselves dispossessed and persecuted afresh for having the temerity to survive and attempt to take up their former lives and property, but he does this straightforwardly and without unseemly emphasis or embellishment.

The historian unfortunately devotes the last three pages of his opus to a pious disquisition on the uses of historical misrepresentation to serve the purposes of propaganda. On Page 376, for example, we read that "Distorted facts are far more dangerous than actual ones." Our instructor proceeds to wag an accusing finger in the direction of the usual right-wing extremist/nationalist culprits, even going so far on Page 377 as to tar erstwhile victims such as "the German expellees try to present the history of their own suffering as equivalent to the suffering of the Jews". Good one there, Dr. Lowe—the fate of David Irving, Norman Davies, and many other historians and journalists should not befall you after this. Of course, while attacking the practitioners of historical exploitation, he nowhere hints at the elephant in the room he has erected: those exploiting that very Holocaust in whose defense he exerts himself so strenuously.

Fortunately, most of the preceding 375 pages of *Savage Continent* are a fascinating, informative compilation of a sector of history that has long justified just the sort of definition and interpretation he has provided for it. His service to the jealous gods of publishing and academic history is in fact sparser

than this hypersensitive review might make it appear, and it is dispensed with by little more effort than would be involved in, say, skipping the last three pages.

He obviously has learned enough to share far more opinions with the martyred David Irving than he could ever admit to under the present circumstances. If those circumstances relax to any extent over the coming decades of this young scholar's expectably long and successful career, we may hope to benefit from his future work even more than we have from the present work.

And if, God forbid, they don't, we may still find his impending oeuvre of great interest and value.

<b>Author(s):</b>	<a href="#">Ezra MacVie</a>
<b>Title:</b>	Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II
<b>Sources:</b>	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , 6(1) (2014)
<b>Dates:</b>	published: 2014-02-23, first posted: 2014-02-23 00:00:00

<https://www.inconvenienthistory.com/6/1/3235>